This was published 19 years ago

Fighting for a few more years

April 14, 2007 — 10:00am

Save Share A A A

Add us as a preferred source on Google

Upstairs at Telstra Stadium, Tom Calma stands at the entrance of the Ambassador Room welcoming everyone with a warm handshake.

The human rights commissioner is an impressive man with curly grey hair and a disarming smile, his gold tie accentuating his expansive demeanour; one imagines that in his youth he would have been a strikingly handsome man.

The venue is filling with activists, bureaucrats and chief executives from health organisations for the launch of Calma's Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Close the Gap campaign. The gap being the 17 years difference in life spans between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.

Seven television crews and several photographers are also jostling for space. They are there supposedly for the launch, but everyone knows they are really after one of the star recruits, Ian Thorpe, yet to arrive.

Most of the guests seem to know Calma personally. He has formed a coalition to change indigenous health. Gordon Gregory, from the National Rural Health Alliance, says he met Calma nine months ago. "He's an impressive fellow, both personally and professionally. Poor Aboriginal health is Australia's greatest social issue."

Down at the podium, Dea Delaney Thiele, the chief executive of the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation

FROM OUR PARTNERS

(NACCHO), is finalising a display. She says: "We have been working with Tom for over a year. He's very passionate and a believer in what our sector can do. He's open to differences of opinion."

Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation's "sea of hands" are everywhere - on large interactive plasma screens and down on the playing field. The organisation's national director, Gary Highland, is pleased with the turnout and says the events are being broadcast live to Aboriginal communities across the country.

Highland says the campaign would not have been possible without Calma.

"Tom's a real mentor," he says. "He's a great intellect but he's also down to earth. He can talk to the PM, but also sit on the dirt with elders in Central Australia. He's all about doing the work for indigenous people and not putting himself forward." By now the media scrum has organised itself along the sides of the room, and the cameras roll as Thorpe and the former Olympic sprinter Cathy Freeman take their place with Calma, the NACCHO chairman Henry Councillor and the ABC television host Jeff McMullen. The commissioner is unfazed by the media frenzy as a Sydney elder, Rob Welch, gives a "welcome to country".

Calma takes the podium and speaks emotively.

"An indigenous child born today does not have the same life chance as a non-indigenous child. This is not just a health sector responsibility. This requires a whole-of-government approach ...

"Why, I ask, should we believe we can halve poverty in Africa by 2015 as the [United Nations] Millennium Development Goals promise to do and yet we are not bold enough to commit to action for indigenous health within Australia?"

Councillor tells the crowd that Aboriginal health centres are forced to employ too many overseas doctors. "Where are own doctors and expertise?"

Freeman and Thorpe are introduced by McMullen, who says: "We need stamina and stature. On the sporting arena we don't see black and white."

Calma watches fascinated as Freeman stands and brings a personal dimension. "When I travel I see I've been very lucky. My parents taught me the importance of health. We should all care about indigenous health, because it's very un-Australian to not care about

others."

Thorpe adds cautiously: "We embrace athletes like Cathy as part of our nation, but we don't embrace indigenous people who are part of these poor health statistics as our own ... I've always known there are people worse off. It's shocking to see the life expectancy in some Aboriginal communities, but amazing goodwill can change the future of their children."

Calma and McMullen talk about the Federal Government's new policy on land rights and individual home ownership. Calma believes it won't work because most indigenous Australians don't have the employment opportunities to keep up mortgage payments. "The Bureau for Consumer Affairs shows that 30 per cent of home repossessions in northern Queensland are from Aboriginal people," he says.

When McMullen suggests we need to look more closely at Native American homeland policies, Calma reveals he's ahead on this, too. "We have been developing a strategy but it's not released yet."

The rest of the room is also networking and discussing policies. Jennie Kendrick of the College of General Practitioners is talking to Greg Phillips, Medical Deans indigenous health program manager. They are organising a seminar because "Aboriginal health is for all GPs".

Later the impressive young Phillips says: "I'm a Tom Calma groupie. We need to write Aboriginal health into the curriculums of all university medical courses." He adds the media are too fixated on the views of Warren Mundine and Noel Pearson.

The Democrats Senator Andrew Bartlett puts down his mobile phone and says: "I really appreciate Tom. He always links what he believes to core principles, which is out of fashion with our Government at the moment."

The Castlereagh Street headquarters of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission is going green, taking measures to reduce energy use by 20 per cent. But there will not be a similar reduction in Calma's own workload.

In his office overlooking the city Calma says doing two jobs was not his choice. The Federal Government's unwritten policy of having three human rights commissioners doing the work of five designated positions has made it mandatory. He regularly works on his computer until after midnight, just trying to keep up with emails.

Calma was appointed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social

Justice Commissioner in 2004, a position created through a recommendation of the royal commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody. He is also appointed as Race Discrimination Commissioner annually, and is halfway through his five-year contract.

His complex origins equipped him well. Calma grew up south-west of Darwin along the Adelaide River. "My extended family still live there and I always spend time on our traditional lands," he says. He adds his kin knew Xavier Herbert and some were inspiration for characters in *Capricornia*.

His father is from the Iwaidja group, and his mother is Kungarakan. They moved their young family to Darwin when their son was three. His mother's father was Dutch and his father's grandfather was Filipino. Both married indigenous women.

Growing up in Darwin brought Calma into contact with diverse influences. He survived schooling and travelled to Adelaide to undertake a degree in social work and community development. On graduating he realised the need for a post-tertiary centre in Darwin and quickly acted upon it. He and his friends lobbied hard and the Aboriginal Taskforce at the Darwin Community College was set up in 1980.

"Within a year I was running the [taskforce] and later the college became the Darwin Institute of Technology and eventually Charles Darwin University." He became a tenured senior lecturer in the early 1980s.

His passion for education was furthered in India and Vietnam, where he worked between 1995 and 2002 as a senior Australian diplomat representing Australia's interests in education and training. Back in Australia he was seconded to work as senior adviser to Philip Ruddock, the then minister for indigenous affairs. Calma later became a manager with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services, the administrative arm of ATSIC.

He is philosophical when asked about the work of his flamboyant predecessors, Mick Dodson and Bill Jonas. "We are living in very different times to when they were in the job. We no longer have ATSIC and there seems to be an urgency to implement change by the Government. I have, however, benefited from the strong foundations that Mick and Bill have laid in raising and advocating indigenous human rights." Still, there's an unfortunate irony that Calma and his staff acknowledge, which makes their job even harder. They are employed by a government that continually flouts its own

responsibilities. Calma cites the Government's tendency to make policy on the run, by ministers making public pronouncements without giving due regard to the constituency.

A month ago in Calma's other role as Race Discrimination Commissioner, he released the Voices of Australia Education module for schools. It is directed at year 9 and 10 students and tells the story of race relations in Australia, the make-up of its diverse population, and how to access the services of the human rights commission.

Calma's big-picture concerns centre on the underresourcing of indigenous housing, the introduction of 99-year leases which he says even the World Bank and other developed countries now sees as detrimental to indigenous people, and the inequality of indigenous health. He sees all these issues as urgent.

"Following the abolition of ATSIC, there is no representative indigenous body at a national level," he says. "There are also no regional representative councils to partner governments. Their absence constitutes a significant flaw in the administration of the new arrangement to date, especially 'mutual obligation', which is a key Government policy."

He believes all the rhetoric about evaluation is unhelpful and mostly ad hoc.

"Sixty per cent of our population is now under 25 years of age, but they are being disenfranchised by the early death of their elders. There's a major difficulty in substantiating land and native title claims and the transfer of knowledge."

Calma says this is finally receiving attention from Ruddock, as Attorney-General, who is looking at a more conciliatory model for native title claims based on mediation.

It was Ruddock who seconded Calma after watching his work at Foreign Affairs. "I found him to be a very professional officer, and valued his advice and perceptions," Ruddock says. "In his new role at HREOC he brings an independent voice to social policy for our indigenous brothers and sisters."

Professor Larissa Behrendt brings another dimension. She met Calma when he interviewed her for a Harvard scholarship. "He is a voice of integrity speaking out against Government neglect and contrary to the spin of the right-wing media. He has gained the confidence of the Aboriginal community as one of our strongest advocates and leaders."